



# Local Nutrition Policies

Doing the right thing for children's health—and meeting new requirements, too

Local nutrition policies are no longer just an important way to help improve child health and school performance. As of June 2004, “school wellness policies” are a requirement for all schools that receive federal funding for child nutrition programs, including school breakfast, school lunch, after-school snack, and summer food programs. This new requirement, part of the Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act of 2004, is good news for American families—and good news for local school districts.

The good news for families is that these school wellness policies will help address the unfortunate nutrition paradox currently facing Americans. Senator Tom Harkin (D-IA) described this contradiction in comments before the Senate passage of the reauthorization legislation:

*On one hand, the specter of malnutrition and hunger continues to haunt millions of Americans, especially children. At the same time, we are confronted with a grave public health threat in the form of obesity and overweight, which are quickly becoming a major threat not just to individuals but to our Nation as a whole.*

The good news for school districts is that the requirement puts the control of student wellness issues exactly where it should be—in the hands of the local education agencies. The even better news for busy districts—with many competing problems on their plates—is that there is no need to create a school wellness policy from scratch.

Districts of all sizes, from all across the country, have been working on nutrition policies for several years. Local agencies can take advantage of the work that has already been done and adapt existing policies to meet the needs of their local communities. When it comes to school wellness policies,

by Dayle Hayes

there is no need to spend limited resources reinventing wheels. There are also plenty of volunteer community partners eager to assist districts in developing the most appropriate policy for their population.

## Requirements of the Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act of 2004

By the 2006–07 school year, all schools receiving federal funding for child nutrition programs will be required, *at a minimum*, to have a school wellness policy with the following features:

- Goals for nutrition education, physical activity, and other school-based activities that are designed to promote student wellness in a manner that the local education agency determines is appropriate;
- Nutrition guidelines selected by the local educational agency for all foods available on each school campus under the local educational agency during the school day with the objectives of promoting student health and reducing childhood obesity;
- Assurances that guidelines for reimbursable school meals are not less restrictive than the regulations issued by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA);
- Ways of measuring how effectively the school wellness policy is being implemented, including designation of one or more persons at each school with operational responsibility for ensuring that the school is meeting the policy; and
- Involvement of parents, students, representatives of the school food authority, the school board and school administrators, and the public, in developing the wellness policy.

These are the minimum requirements established by the federal legislation. School districts may choose to include additional features or to integrate student wellness with other ongoing programs.

## Seven Steps to an Effective School Wellness Policy

This is a great time to develop an effective school wellness policy. Hundreds of school districts have already blazed the trail

of development—and dozens have several years of experience with implementation.

Awareness about the weight, nutrition, and health problems of American children is at an all-time high—thanks to coverage on the nightly news and the front pages of newspapers and magazines. More importantly, these health issues, and the role of schools in addressing them, are on the agendas of national organizations from the American Academy of Pediatrics and the American Cancer Society to the National Dairy Council and the National PTA. This means that local members of these groups are ready and willing to get involved with creating solutions for their schools and communities.

Local members of these groups are ready and willing to get involved with creating solutions for their schools and communities. The stakeholders who can assist school districts in developing effective, science-based wellness policies include:

- Health care providers, especially pediatricians, dietitians, public health professionals, dentists, and orthodontists;
- Hospitals, especially those with pediatric services;
- Nonprofit health organizations, like the American Diabetes Association, American Cancer Society, American Heart Association, and American Lung Association;
- Physical activity groups, like state games organizations ([www.stategames.org](http://www.stategames.org)), YMCA/YWCA, youth sports leagues, and commercial fitness centers;
- Community youth organizations, like Boys and Girls Clubs, Boy/Girls Scouts of America, and faith-based groups for young people;
- University departments and other government agencies, especially those involved in nutrition, physical activity, and education; and
- Food, nutrition, and agricultural businesses and organizations, including food distributors, vending companies, culinary/chefs associations, Cooperative Extension programs, and producer groups (like state dairy, beef, and pork councils).

Based on the experience of a wide variety of schools from cities and towns across America, here are seven steps to developing a successful school wellness policy.

### 1. *Involve multiple stakeholders.*

The most obvious, and important, stakeholders are the school constituencies that will be affected by a wellness policy. The committee or group charged with policy development

must include appropriate representation for students, parents, foodservice staff, teachers, administrators, nurses, coaches, and school board members.

Additional community representatives can offer necessary resources and expertise to the process of developing a school wellness policy. Depending on the size and make-up of a district, appropriate public representation might include members from the stakeholder groups listed previously. Concerned parents, like a dietitian or dentist, are often willing volunteers for a policy development committee.

## 2. Assess current policies.

Before developing a new policy, it is critical to review all existing policies related to student health, school food, and nutrition and physical education—at both the local and state levels. Some current policies may provide a foundation for a more comprehensive school wellness policy. In other cases, an existing health policy can be expanded in the areas of nutrition and physical activity.

## 3. Get community input.

Improvements in school-based food and activity options will need significant support from students, parents, and the wider community to succeed over time. It is, therefore, essential to obtain community input while developing a policy. Input can be gathered formally and informally through a variety of channels. The most successful districts use multiple channels, including:

- Student advisory councils and surveys;
- Parent meetings and surveys; and
- Community forums and town meetings.

Again, the stakeholder groups listed previously can help provide the resources necessary for the process. For example, the community relations of a local hospital might help print, distribute, and collate a community survey about possible improvements in nutrition and physical activity for schools.

## 4. Follow established health guidelines for children.

The goal of a school wellness policy in schools is healthy growth, normal development, and academic success for all children. Undocumented and overly restrictive dietary approaches to childhood weight control, behavior management, or other health issues are not appropriate as school pol-

# MERCEDES, TEXAS: SUCCESS IN PROGRESS

Mercedes Independent School District (ISD) may be a small, rural, low-income district at the southern tip of Texas, but they are in the top tier of schools when it comes to nutrition policies. According to Donna Fryar, the assistant director of Child Nutrition Services, Mercedes ISD began working on a nutrition policy in June 2001 as part of the district's five-year self-improvement plan. In fact, they were writing a school wellness policy long before the U.S. Congress even thought of the term!

Three years and several versions later, Mercedes ISD has a comprehensive, detailed *Student/Nutrition Wellness Plan*. Thanks to the hard work of many dedicated school staff and community members, the Mercedes policy has strong support within the district—and it exceeds the requirements of the new USDA legislation as well.

When asked to identify the keys to the district's success in developing a broad policy, Ms. Fryar lists several factors:

- **Resources:** Use of USDA's *Changing the Scene* to assess environment and NASBE's *Fit, Healthy and Read to Learn* to develop their initial plan.
- **Support:** Backing from central administration and campus principals for the development of a plan focused on concerns for students' overall health.
- **Involvement:** Commitment of a diverse committee to develop the *Student Nutrition/Wellness Plan*, including Student Services Coordinator (chair); Food Service Director and Assistant Director; Athletic Director, school staff members (appointed by principals); and three parents from each campus.
- **Gradual approach:** Willingness to take small, gradual steps toward improving the nutrition environments in Mercedes schools.

The most recent version of the Mercedes policy, effective June 2004, includes a specific implementation component. During the 2004–05 school year, each campus will review the indicators of the *Student Nutrition/Wellness Plan*, evaluating progress in each area as exceptional, acceptable, or needing improvement.

The initial results have been positive. Since introduction of the policy, all carbonated soft drinks have been removed from campuses and replaced with water, sport drinks, juice, and juice drinks. New options, like fat-free ice cream bars, yogurt, and string cheese have been added to the a la carte choices, and sales of these items have been strong. Overall, during the 2003–04 school year, there was no significant change in foodservice revenue.

Nutrition has become a topic of conversation throughout the district. Principals are much more aware of the items sold in their schools and organizations are finding other sources of income to replace candy sales. The district-wide nutrition committee is moving ahead with its future goals: improving physical fitness in the district and developing plans for an employee wellness program.

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# MERCEDES INDEPENDENT SCHOOL DISTRICT STUDENT NUTRITION/WELLNESS PLAN

## Purpose and Goal:

States, in part, that “all students shall possess the knowledge and skills necessary to make nutritious and enjoyable food choices for a lifetime. In addition, staff are encouraged to model healthy eating and physical activity as a valuable part of daily life. The [MISD] shall prepare, adopt, and implement a comprehensive plan to encourage healthy eating and physical activity....”

### ■ **Component 1: A Commitment to Nutrition and Physical Activity**

Includes creation of a School Health Advisory Committee (SHAC), notes general responsibilities for principals and food service staff, and requires nutrition education to be integrated across the curriculum and physical activity encouraged daily.

### ■ **Component 2: Quality School Meals**

States that the school system “will participate in a district-wide universal feeding program providing meals at no charge to all students,” that foodservice staff will be properly qualified, that menus will meet USDA and Texas nutrition standards, and that students will be given the opportunity to provide input on the menus.

### ■ **Component 3: Other Healthy Food Options**

Specifies that the SHAC will recommend nutrition guidelines for food and beverages offered through social events and other school functions; that students in possession of foods or beverages of minimal nutritional value can have those items confiscated; that no foods or beverages other than those provided through the school food service will be available to elementary school students at anytime (such foods and beverages will not be available to junior high students until the end of the school day and will not be available to high school students until the end of the last lunch period); and that staff must not use food either as a reward or punishment.

### ■ **Component 4: Pleasant Eating Experiences**

Encourages specific efforts to create a pleasant and healthy lunchtime atmosphere, including the areas of facility design, scheduling, socializing, appropriate noise levels, and minimum eating times (10 minutes for breakfast and 20 minutes for lunch).

### ■ **Component 5: Nutrition Education**

Specifies that the district will follow the health education curriculum standards and guidelines of the Texas Education Agency and that schools will link nutrition education activities with the coordinated school health program; encourages teachers to integrate nutrition education into core curricular areas; and directs schools to participate in USDA nutrition programs such as “Team Nutrition.”

### ■ **Component 6: Marketing**

States that students will receive positive, motivating messages about healthy eating and physical activity; that schools will not allow advertising that promotes less nutritious food choices; and that schools will work with a variety of media to spread the word to the community about a healthy school nutrition environment.

### ■ **Component 7: Implementation**

Delineates the composition and responsibilities of the SHAC.

The complete text of the policy is available online at [www.misdtx.net/menus/Nutrition%20PolicyR101403.pdf](http://www.misdtx.net/menus/Nutrition%20PolicyR101403.pdf).

icy. When questions arise about the scientific evidence for specific practices, schools can rely on guidelines from recognized child health experts, like the American Academy of Pediatrics (policy statements available through state AAP chapters or online at [http://aappolicy.aappublications.org/policy\\_statement](http://aappolicy.aappublications.org/policy_statement)).

All federal child nutrition programs follow national dietary guidance as established by USDA and the Department of Health and Human Services. The U.S. Dietary Guidelines and the Food Guide Pyramid are currently being updated with the latest scientific research. The revised guidelines and graphic, appropriate for use in school wellness policies, are scheduled for release in early 2005. Details on current guidelines, the status of the revisions, and specific release dates are online at [www.usda.gov/cnpp/DG2005](http://www.usda.gov/cnpp/DG2005).

Families may choose to follow a variety of diets based on individual preferences and lifestyles. Schools may choose to offer a variety of healthy menu choices to meet customer demand—low-fat, carb-controlled, or vegetarian options, for example. However, school policies that apply to the entire school population must follow science-based guidelines established by credible groups and government agencies.

## 5. *Balance specificity and flexibility.*

To be effective, policies need to be as specific and as comprehensive as possible. School wellness policies need to be specific about nutrition guidelines, and they must apply guidelines equally to *all* foods and beverages served at school. Policies that apply only to school meal programs undermine the financial viability of school foodservice, where the most balanced, nutrient-rich choices are available to *all* children.

School wellness policies must also be appropriate for the needs of young people at different grade levels. As children transition from kindergarten through high school, they need increasing opportunities to make balanced choices and practice the healthy eating habits being taught through classroom nutrition education.

*Eat Smart: North Carolina's Recommended Standards for All Foods Available in School* divides its recommendations into three grade levels: PreK–5, 6–8, and 9–12. This thorough document provides guidelines for all foods and beverages offered through school meals, a la carte, vending (beverages and snack foods), and school events (meetings, parties, concessions, fundraisers, etc.). The document can be

downloaded at [www.eatsmartmovemorenc.com/ESMMmaterials/SchoolFoodsStandards.pdf](http://www.eatsmartmovemorenc.com/ESMMmaterials/SchoolFoodsStandards.pdf).

These recommendations recognize the need for flexibility in two other important aspects of policy development. The first is the speed of implementation. While some schools may quickly implement a school wellness policy, others will need to make gradual changes in order to achieve long-term success. The North Carolina standards are organized in four categories: needs improvement, basic, proficient, and superior.

Flexibility is also necessary when describing allowable food and beverage products. The food and beverage marketplace is changing rapidly as manufacturers respond to concerns about child health issues. This means that new, healthier products and more appropriate packaging are available on an almost daily basis. In order to avoid constant revisions of a policy, lists of specific items and serving sizes are best suitable for appendices or attachments, rather than in the main body of a policy.

## 6. Utilize existing resources.

Many organizations are collecting and sharing a growing “catalog” of nutrition and wellness policies from local districts. The best place to begin a search for appropriate policy “templates” is with the agency that administers USDA child nutrition programs within a state—a state department of education, office of public instruction, or agriculture department. These agencies can provide applicable state policies that must be followed. They should have access to existing and “under-construction” policies from other districts within a state.

These websites provide excellent resources for developing nutrition, physical activity, and other health-related policies:

- **Action for Healthy Kids (AFHK)**  
[www.actionforhealthykids.org](http://www.actionforhealthykids.org)  
Information on state teams and a searchable database of successful programs (under construction).
- **CDC Division of School and Adolescent Health**  
[www.cdc.gov/HealthyYouth](http://www.cdc.gov/HealthyYouth)  
Resources include *School Health Index*, *Coordinated School Health Program*, and databases like Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System (YRBSS).
- **Michigan Department of Education**  
[www.michigan.gov/documents/healthyweight\\_13649\\_7.pdf](http://www.michigan.gov/documents/healthyweight_13649_7.pdf)  
*The Role of Michigan Schools in Promoting Healthy Weight: A Consensus Paper* (2001) features detailed guidance on all aspects of weight in schools.

- **National Association of State Boards of Education (NASBE)**

[www.nasbe.org/HealthySchools/Sample\\_Policies/Sample\\_Policies.html](http://www.nasbe.org/HealthySchools/Sample_Policies/Sample_Policies.html)

Sample policies on a variety of topics, including healthy eating and physical activity, and resources like *Fit, Healthy and Ready to Learn*.

- **Parents Advocating School Accountability (PASA)**  
<http://pasaorg.tripod.com/nutrition/archive.html>

Archive of national news articles related to student nutrition, including policies and legislation.

- **School Nutrition Association (SNA)**  
(Formerly American School Food Service Association)  
<http://www.asfsa.org/childnutrition/govtaffairs/reauth/index.asp>

Implementation details for Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act of 2004 and many other child nutrition resources for members and non-members.

- **USDA Team Nutrition: Healthy School Nutrition Environment**

[www.fns.usda.gov/tn/Healthy/index.htm](http://www.fns.usda.gov/tn/Healthy/index.htm)

Resources include *Changing the Scene: Enhancing the School Nutrition Environment* and *Making It Happen: School Nutrition Success Stories*.

## 7. Plan for implementation.

Adopting a school wellness policy is just one step toward a healthy school environment. The key to real improvement is the day-to-day implementation of a policy and all its components. The most effective policies incorporate implementation plans from the outset. Important implementation questions to address include:

- Who will be responsible for monitoring the implementation of the policy?
- What indicators will be used to evaluate the progress of implementation?
- How often will implementation be evaluated?

Dayle Hayes, president, *Nutrition for the Future in Billings, Montana*, has presented “*Changing the Scene: Enhancing the School Nutrition Environment*” workshops in over a dozen states. She is also a co-author of “*Making It Happen: School Nutrition Success Stories*,” a joint CDC-USDA project documenting effective strategies to help kids eat more healthfully at school.